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ABSTRACT

In order to revitalize the often floundering black studies courses in institutions of higher education, it might be wise to incorporate them in an all encompassing ethnic studies program. This would enable members of various ethnic groups, as well as members of the majority group, to gain greater insight into the problems of their follow citizens and greater respect for their contributions to the general culture. Such a program would have five facets: a self-instructional course for acquainting students with minority group contributions to American culture; a problems-centered course focusing on issues faced by minority groups; separate courses dealing with problems pertinent to members of all of the minority groups; a six-week program in which students live, work, and do research among persons of a different race; and a seminar in which students discuss their six-week visit, report on research, and formulate opinions. (JM)

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POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS FOR BLACK STUDIES PROGRAMS IN AMERICAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

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The cataclysmic social changes of the 1960's are reflected in the redirection of American education from an inordinate emphasis on materialism to an emphasis on humanism, a humanism which was designed to help men understand themselves, their relationship to each other, and their place in an infinite universe. The resulting desire for freedom, equality, and justice resulted in the Black Revolution, which, in turn, fathered the Ethnic Revolution. Thus the long prevailing emphasis in American education on the humanities of the western world was abandoned by thousands of young Americans of differing ethnic backgrounds who demanded that they be taught more about their heritage as American Indians, Oriental Americans, as Afro-Americans, and as Spanish Americans. Indeed so insistent were they that they be allowed to discover themselves as members of a specific ethnic group that some became concerned that the notion of America as a melting pot was dissolving. C. L. Sulzberger put it this way: "Nowadays one sometimes feels the sociological script is being played deliberately backward. . . . Carrots, leeks, onion, turnips pop abruptly out of the broth and into the chef's embarrased hand. . . . The melting pot seems to be unmelting."[1]

A more optimistic view may be found in this statement made by Norman Lederer, Director, University of Wisconsin Ethnic and Minority Studies Center:

> The melting pot has not melted. . . . Ethnic and minority groups differ in their life styles from those of middle class

> America. As a matter of fact, the last ten years has seen what can be called an 'ethnic renaissance.' Following the thrust of the Blacks to assert their self-identity and culture, the Indians, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans and those of immigrant stock have brought their cultural uniqueness and their accomplishments to the fore. . . . There is pride in being 'different' and there may well be considerable merit in remaining somewhat nonengaged with a majority culture plagued with war, economic depression, crime and racism.[2]

Thus it is with regret that one realizes that the hopes of many of the students who demanded courses in Black Studies are floundering because fewer and fewer students are enrolling in them. The status of the discipline was discussed in a fairly recent article in Newsweek in which some black leaders are quoted as making disparaging remarks about it. For example, one is said to have designated Black Studies as a hoax which "made [sic] black people feel good instead of filling their minds with something useful," while another is quoted as saying that black students are "bound to find linguistic expertise in Swahili of dubious value for life in urban America."[3] While both statements are cause for concern, the latter is particularly distressing since it shows that there is a great need to familiarize blacks with the value of learning certain African languages. For example, it is significant that Swahili is the first language of millions of Africans from the Equator to South Africa and that its use is spreading to other parts of Africa so rapidly that there are those who think that it has possibilities of becoming the official continental language and, therefore, a means of hastening Pan-Africanism. Finally, it should be noted that much of ancient African history was written in Swahili, although an Arabic script, by scholars and merchants from the Middle East. Hence, those blacks who study the language can do their race a great service by uncovering much of its past, a service which would surely be a boon to a race whose earliest history has been almost entirely erased from the annals of early civilization.

Newsweek also states that enrollments in the area have fallen off drastically. The importance of arresting the demise of Black Studies cannot be overestimated. The theory of the Greeks that humanism and democracy go hand in hand would seem to imply that the very well-being of America as a democratic society depends upon the extent to which educators provide experiences which enable their students to determine their status as human beings and as citizens, for, as Ralph Ellison says, if you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are.[4] It is the purpose of this paper to suggest some of the ways in which Black Studies might become a more viable part of the offerings of institutions of higher learning.

The first of these is that those who are responsible for planning Black Studies programs consider making them a part of an all encompassing Ethnic Studies program. It would seem that no sooner than the Black Revolution had given birth to the Ethnic Revolution that the resurging humanistic studies which ensued immediately subdivided into as many categories as there are minority ethnic groups. The result has been that neither Black Studies nor American Indian Studies nor American Oriental Studies nor Spanish American Studies have had a substantial attraction for students of other racial groups. It is certainly true that many of the "inhabitants" of Academia consider Black literature, for example, as being principally for black students. Consequently, a large number of persons of other racial groups have not benefitted from the information to which black students have been exposed in many meaningful classes. To organize the new curriculum in this way would be to help keep the ingredients of the melting pot from popping out of the broth and back into the chef's hand.

Although the Ethnic Studies program which is being discussed in this paper deals specifically with the humanities, the writer would like to

stress her belief that other disciplines might serve as a support to the core program. Perhaps many of the problems which have hindered the effectiveness of the various Ethnic Studies program are the result of the fact that often their scope was too broad. For example, in one program which was proposed, although it was never implemented, students desiring a major in the area were to take more than 90 quarter hours of such widely differing courses as "Black Economics," "Institutional Racism," and "Black Athletes," in addition to the usual "Afro-American Music," "Afro-American Literature," etc. It is needless to say that there was little time to take subjects outside of this narrowly constructed curriculum.

It must be admitted that the reality of the need for students to take subjects which will prepare them for the job market, would seem to make it mandatory that programs in Ethnic Studies might best be kept somewhat modest until such time as more appropriate job opportunities are available. Likewise it would seem reasonable to suggest that the core of the discipline be limited to the humanities since that is the area which is best capable of helping men realize their position in this universe in relationship to others and to nature. Subjects like "Institutional Racism," etc., could then be used to verify or refute the positions taken in the humanities courses, or they might be taken as electives.

The second suggestion which, in actuality, is implicit in the first is that a moratorium be placed on Ethnic Studies as a major area. This means that students will be able to acquire a minor in the field only. Such a possibility might seem discouraging to those who have worked hard to establish Black Studies as a major discipline, for it would seem that what is being suggested is that not only should the notion of a separate discipline devoted specifically to black Americans be forgotten, but that the area which

supplants it, that of Ethnic Studies, be relegated to a minor position. While such a suggestion might seem difficult because of the hard work which it took to get the academic community to accept courses in Black Studies, it would seem to be throughly realistic in the light of the rather realistic economic and educational climates which are present in the 1970's.

That the new Ethnic Studies program should be centered around the humanities of minority groups in the United States might also seem to be a rather limiting suggestion. Evidence to support the belief that such a move might be beneficial as a means of realizing the American ideal of a nation in which various ethnic groups live together in harmony would seem to be tremendous. In the first place, the melting pot ideal can only be realized when there is a mutual respect based on an understanding of the problems which groups share. Thus the fact that both Mexican Americans and American Indians are the inheritors of a somewhat related cultural background--that of the Central American and that of the North American Indians--and the fact that Spanish Americans from the Carribean Islands and from Puerto Rico were bequeathed many cultural legacies by their African ancestors would seem to indicate that these groups have much in common. They--like Oriental Americans--must live in a basically western culture, in spite of the often conflicting values which are a part of the major culture and those of their own primary social group.

But more than cultural ties are shared by some of these peoples. For example, Mexican Americans, as well as American Indians were dispossed of land which by historical rights should have been theirs, and many Spanish Americans and all blacks have ancestors who were forciably transported to the new world. In addition, all of these groups face poverty, discrimination in employment, housing, or what have you. For example, although Orientals

have fared better economically and have thus been more acceptable to the main stream of Americans, the stark reality is that they are still looked upon as outsiders. Consider what happened to the Japanese during World War II. Soon after Pearl Harbor something occured in the United States which no one would ever have dreamed possible: thousands of Japanese were placed in concentration camps, and it was obvious that more than a fear of their staging a general uprising was involved. The suspicion of racism was underscored when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima rather than on Berlin, although the United States had the capability of doing so before the peace treaty with Germany was signed.

The ethnic minorities studies approach would be helpful not only to these groups but also to members of the majority group in that they will gain a greater insight into the problems of their fellow citizens and a greater respect for them through a study of their contributions to the making of the general culture. In addition, they will be better able to come to grips with their own problems as human beings, since these understandings will help them clarify their own values more effectively.

If, then, such a program is desirable, one might justifiably desire to know how it might be effectively planned and executed. More specifically, a minor in Ethnic Studies might well be based on the following concepts:

1. There is a great desire among Americans of the various minority ethnic groups to know more about their heritage, both in terms of their recent and of their more distant past.

2. It is necessary for them to have this information so that they can discover their identity as it relates to Americans in general and to humanity as a whole.

3. All Americans can profit from such knowledge since it will help them acquire a better understanding of the relationships of the ideals upon

which the United States was founded, their place in the society of Americans, and a realization of their own personal values.

4. Although certain minority groups share certain aspects of similar backgrounds and, as such, will profit from a realization of these, all Americans have much in common: they all have contributed to American culture.

Perhaps a more detailed outline of such a program might now be in order. A typical Ethnic Studies Program might be viewed as having five facets which may be delineated as follows: (1) a self-instructional course designed to acquaint students with the contributions of minority groups to American culture (2) a problems-centered course dealing with issues which have faced minority ethnic groups and a discussion of how they have handled them (3) separate courses dealing with problems pertinent to members of all of the minority groups (4) a six-week program in which students live, work and do research among persons of a race different from their own (5) a seminar in which the students discuss their six-week "tour", report on their research, formulate opinions, etc.

As has been said, the self-instructional program would be so planned as to help students learn about the contributions of minority groups to American culture through a study of interdisciplinary subject matter. They would be asked to sign a contract in which they promise to listen to a series of tapes, both audio and visual, listen to a number of musical recordings, and view a number of films, as well as read a given number of pertinent literary and historical materials, etc. For example, they might be asked to view the film, Role Conflict, which film deals with the conflicting expectations of a white teacher and that of a six year old's tribal leaders.[5] In addition to viewing the film, students might be asked to read stories, poems, and folklore about the child's tribal beliefs. Once a week they

would be asked to attend group discussions in which they exchange ideas which their activities have brought to their attention.

The problems centered courses might be of several kinds. For example, one might deal with the roles which women of the various minority groups play in the family structure. For example, American Indian and black women are less restricted than are those of Oriental and Spanish abstraction. Reasons for the differing expectations of these women might be traced from historical, religious, and philosophical perspectives, while the roles might be made more explicit through a study of such Indian writers as Black Storm Elk and H. Storm, as well as through the works of such Cuban writers as Alej Carpentier and Frederico Ganbra, among others. The works of Lorraine Hansberry would be helpful in delineating the roles of black women.

Courses which are thematically arranged might be another alternative. For example, the differences in the approaches which the various ethnic groups have taken as a means of solving the problems of social and political injustices might be one of these. An old proverb might serve to illustrate what is meant here:

> The Indians fought and bled and died.
> The Negroes laughed and multiplied.

The point is that blacks have, as Paul Laurence Dunbar so aptly put it, learned to "wear the mask" and to solve their problems through patience and peaceful methods. During the 1960's Civil Rights movement, this principle was illustrated by the majority of black leaders who chose Ghandi's tactic of passive resistance over violence as a method of achieving their goals. Contrast this method with those of the American Indians at "Wounded Knee," who approached the problem somewhat militantly, even as did their ancestors who tried to drive the white man from their ancestral lands. Thus one of the themes of this course might well be why the different ethnic

groups have chosen to use certain techniques in the pursuit of their rights.

An assortment of courses dealing with blacks, Spanish Americans, etc., could form the third facet of the suggested Ethnic Studies Program. Much of the same literature which is offered in courses in other academic areas could be corss listed as requirements for this minor. It is also at this time that students might be urged to concentrate on the history of their race, their African heritage, for example. In addition, they might be encouraged to study a language which will be beneficial in helping them to understand each other, or even their own heritage. These courses should be geared toward allowing students to do an in-depth study of some aspect of the human experiences which they face as Americans and as citizens of the world. The experiences which they should have after having participated in the first and second facets of this proposed program should contribute greatly to their study of the special courses.

During the fourth facet, students would be required to live and work with members of other ethnic groups. For example, an Indian student who is proficient in Spanish, might enjoy working with Spanish Americans. The kind of work which they would perform would depend upon the situation and the individual student. Thus, one who is majoring in secondary education might be allowed to do her practicum on an Indian reservation. While there, she could teach literary works by and about blacks, as well as some by members of other racial groups.

Hopefully, some students will elect to spend their time researching such information as, for example, what poetry, literature, and music show about the attitudes of those who live on Indian reservations who are forced to send their young children to government sponsored boarding schools, or about how they plan to maintain their culture in the face of obvious

attempts to erase it. Students might also be interested in surveying the opinions of those with whom they work regarding aspects of the various cultures, aspects which have not received wide attention.

After their six-week tour of duty, the students would return to their universities and colleges, at which time they would begin seminars dealing with their experiences. They might give oral and written presentations of their on-site research or of whatever project they pursued. Perhaps, it is not too much to hope that some might be inspired to express themselves creatively through writing a series of poems, novels, dramas, or even through creating musical compositions. It must not be forgotten that one of the main purposes of this last part of the Program is to allow students to exchange ideas which have developed as a result of their participation in it.

The success of the Ethnic Studies Program which has been outlined here depends upon two major assumptions. The first is that there must be a special breed of instructors involved who are willing to work hard in researching information for ideas which can form the basis of meaningful studies. They must be creative in that it will be necessary to prepare slide-tape presentations, audio tapes, etc., since there is a paucity of materials such as those called for here. Furthermore, they must be flexible enough to work cooperatively with others, for there will be times when individuality must be submerged for the good of the program as a whole; for example, there will be times when team teaching will be a more effective method of instruction than lectures delivered by single instructors.

The second assumption is that knowledgeable advisement will be available. This is most important since many students who would be interested

in this kind of program might be frightened away by those who foster the notions that black studies do not teach anything useful or that those who study Swahili will find it of little value in a ghetto setting. Again, there is a need for advisors who are cognizant of the job possibilities beyond those in an urban ghetto for those who know African languages, not only as teachers in African countries, but as researchers also. In addition, advisors should emphasize that persons trained in Ethnic Studies might not only work as teachers in many secondary schools which are beginning to add such subjects, but that they might find work with such agencies as VISTA. Thus one who has majored in a more traditional area, it should be pointed out, will have an added advantage by having minored in Ethnic Studies.

In summary, what has been suggested here is that it might be advisable to abandon the concept of Black Studies in favor of one of Ethnic Studies, a discipline which would deal with the humanistic studies of American minority racial groups. Such an approach would be advantageous in that it would help Americans understand their past, present, and future as members of one of the most unique experiments in government. Furthermore, this paper has implied that it is only through the defragmentation of the humanistic studies of these groups that America can ever really truly become the melting pot which it is said to be.

FOOTNOTES

[1]C. L. Sulzberger, "Running the Film Backward," The New York Times, April 2, 1972, quoted in Winnie Bengelsdorf, Ethnic Studies in Higher Education, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, Washington, p. 2.

[2]Norman Lederer, quoted in Winnie Bengelsdorf, Ethnic Studies in Higher Education, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, Washington, p. 3.

[3]Newsweek, March 18, 1974, pp. 81-82.

[4]Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, Signet, New York, 1952, p. 499.

[5]University of Cororado Protocol Materials Development Project, National Resources Dissemination Center, University of Tampa, Tampa, 1974.